

Mammoth Cave

National Park
National Park Service
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The Bransfords of Mammoth Cave

Curious visitors have come to Mammoth Cave since 1816 to see the subterranean realm. Travelers of those early years often wrote accounts of the cave and their experiences, accounts which were published on both sides of the Atlantic and brought more visitors to discover the cave first-hand with the only people who truly knew this underworld – the guides. And among the greatest of the guides were the Bransfords.

Bransford family members guided visitors in Mammoth Cave from 1838 until 1939. Prior to the Bransfords, two generations of earlier guides had conducted travelers through the cave.

MAT and NICK

A new era began in 1838 when Franklin Gorin, an attorney of Glasgow, Kentucky, purchased the property from Hyman and Simon Gratz. Gorin brought his 17-year-old slave, Stephen, for a guide. He also hired from his Glasgow friend, Thomas Bransford, two slaves, Mat and Nick, brothers about the same age as Stephen.

Guides Joe Shackleford and Archibald Miller, Jr. taught the three younger guides the tourist routes in the cave, as they themselves had been taught by earlier guides. The three were willing learners and became the principle guides during the next two decades.

Not content with the known cave, each of

to their legal owners. Croghan planned a tuberculosis hospital in the cave, and in 1841 the three were set to work building cabins in the cave to house future patients. Two were built in Audubon Avenue, some in the Main Cave, and one in Pensico Avenue.

Dr. Croghan died in 1849, and Stephen in 1857. Now Mat and Nick were the most experienced guides. Dr. Charles W. Wright, in his 1858 guidebook, wrote that “although a great deal has been said and written about Stephen, from the fact that he was the favorite of a former proprietor, he was in no respect superior to either Mat or Nicholas, nor was his acquaintance with the cave more thorough or extensive.”

Wright also mentioned that “Mat, as well as Nicholas, saved a party from drowning on the Echo River, by his courage and self-possession.”

Some visitors wanted to explore the new parts of the cave. In 1863 F.J. Stevenson of London, England, spent ten days doing just that. He and Nick descended into the bottom of Gorin’s Dome, and found a pool of water issuing from under a low arch of rock, and passing out by a similar arch on the other side. The following day a small boat was constructed and lowered by guides to the bottom of the dome. Stevenson and Nick spent the next two days exploring the



Mat assisted Charles Waldack, a Cincinnati photographer, in taking the first photographs in the cave. The equipment, large and awkward, included a stereographic camera, magnesium flare holders, and bulky reflectors, all of which Mat helped transport from place to place within the cave. Forty-two wet-plate stereoscopic views were taken in 1866 and published by Anthony & Co. of New York in 1867. These are now at the Library of Congress. The one showing Mat at the cave entrance is a favorite of collectors.

During his 50 years as a guide, Nick saw many famous people come to the cave. Ralph Waldo Emerson came in 1850. His impressions of the Star Chamber inspired one of his essays. The following year Jenny Lind sat in the Devil’s Armchair in Gothic Avenue. It has since been known as Jenny Lind’s Armchair. In 1872 Grand Duke Alexis of Russia toured the cave, as did Dom Pedro, Emperor of Brazil, in 1876. That same year Shakespearean actor Edwin Booth is said to have recited from *Hamlet* from a high natural stage in the room since known as Booth’s Amphitheatre. One of the 1867 visitors gave a colorful description of Nick:

“We call him Old Nick, considerably past middle age; wrinkled, a short, broad strongman ... every one of the innumerable wrinkles in his black face made more distinct, with his white beard and mustache, and the whites of his eyes seeming to glow in the blue elfish light”

HENRY

A second generation of Bransfords followed the first as guides at Mammoth Cave. Henry, son of Mat, was born in 1849; trained by his father, he began guiding around 1872. He delighted in showing the saltpetre hoppers used during the war of 1812, and the road through the Main Cave along which ox carts brought petre dirt to the hoppers. Tracks of the cartwheels remained in the road, as did some of the corncobs at the place where the oxen had been tethered and fed. One visitor observed that the cobs appeared perfectly preserved by the pure cave air and asked to purchase

TO, NICK THE GUIDE
1857 Aug 17th

Inscription on the cave wall, Snowball Room

them entered the dark unknown and made new discoveries. Mat was a member of the exploring team that first entered Mammoth Dome and found there a miner’s lantern that had been dropped down Crevice Pit when the cave was worked for saltpetre. He also discovered at the end of Franklin Avenue a beautiful grotto later named Serena’s Arbor.

The cave property changed hands again in 1839 when Dr. John Croghan of Louisville purchased the cave. Stephen was sold with the cave, and Mat and Nick were leased as before. In the truest sense, the three belonged to the cave, and only secondarily

upstream part of the river.

Stevenson later described his discoveries on what has since been known as “Stevenson’s Lost River.” When a dam was built on the Green River 43 years later the water level rose in the dome, closing the only known entrance to that river. Remains of the boat could still be seen at the bottom of the dome in 1900.

Stevenson also wrote that he and Nick explored Roaring River and that he, Nick, and guide Frank Demunbrun each descended the Maelstrom, the deep pit at the end of the “Long Route.”

one as a keepsake. Henry obliged, and then said that he would carry in more cobs for future visitors ...

One of Henry’s chores in 1882 was watering and tending the short-lived mushroom farm in Audubon Avenue. During the previous year natural beds of mushrooms were found in River Hall. Since there was a considerable demand for this delicacy in Louisville and Nashville, as well as a the cave hotel dining room, three of the Estate Trustees organized the Mammoth Cave Mushroom Co. One trustee proved untrustworthy, however, absconding with all the cash.

Parades of visitors came with each passing year. Herman Zagel, a German visitor in 1887, described Henry as: “a handsome young negro man built like Hercules, tall and broad-shouldered. On Echo River, he sang with a full melodious voice ... a three-tone sequence of notes ... which came back a splendid chord.”

Mat Bransford died in 1886. Henry died in 1894, leaving two young sons, Louis and Matt, who would later serve as a third generation of Bransford guides. But in the meantime, William Bransford, of the second generation, was becoming a well-known and respected guide at the cave.

WILLIAM

William, Mat’s grandson and Henry’s nephew, was born in 1866. He began guiding in 1888, and continued for over 40 years. Tall and dignified, he accompanied the cave exhibits to the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893.

The management had stripped beautiful Charlotte’s Grotto of its gypsum flowers for exhibition at the fair. The original “Mammoth Cave” mummy (“Fawn Hoof”) had been exhibited at the cave since 1815; the role of the “Cave Mummy” was now being played at the cave by another mummy, “Little Alice.” Similar in appear-

ance, few people knew the difference.

William exhibited the mummy and the gypsum flowers in White City at the Chicago fair. Thereafter, the area off Cleaveland Avenue from which the flowers had been taken was known by the guides as Specimen Avenue.

William was an exploring guide. In May 1907 he and guide Edward Hawkins took Benjamin F. Einbigler of New York City through a maze of passages to the left of Boone Avenue. Beyond, they discovered the majestic Cathedral Domes. The following month author Horace C. Hovey was taken to their discovery. It appeared on his 1909 cave map as “Hovey’s Cathedral.” On the same map he remembered the two guides by naming one passage “Hawkins Way” and another “Bransford Avenue.” This is the only feature in the cave named for any of the Bransford Guides.

LOUIS and MATT

A third generation of Bransford guides took up the lantern with Louis and Matt, sons of Henry. Louis began guiding in 1895. Matt began as a lunch carrier in 1897 and became a full guide in 1905. Like the guides before and after them they saw the hundreds of names and dates placed on the cave wall since 1802.

In 1907 a stone plaque was dedicated by Chancellor J.H. Kirkland of Vanderbilt University as a tribute to the students and alumni of the school. The ceremony was held in Sparks Avenue just beyond Bandit Hall. The polished granite plaque includes the quotation from Thomas Carlyle:

“Out of the lowest depths, there is a path to the loftiest heights.”

Thereafter the room with the plaque has been known as Vanderbilt University Hall, and the guides took pride in showing this literary gem on their cave tours.

Occasionally large banqueting groups were served dinner in the cave. Louis and Matt long remembered the time in 1915 when tables were set in Audubon Avenue for two hundred guests. They dined on hotel linens by candlelight, and then were taken on a cave tour.

By 1930 there were eight Bransfords on the guide roster. The fourth generation included Arthur, Clifton, Eddie, Elzie and George, sons and nephews of Louis. William died in 1934. The younger Bransfords left the guide service by 1935, on the eve of the cave becoming the nation’s 29th national park. Matt retired in 1937 and Louis in 1939.

An era had ended. Four generations of the Bransford family had guided their last tour, after leading visitors safely through shadow for over 100 years.